

# **Iran and Strategic Power Projection: The Iran-Iraq War as a Foundation of Understanding**

**A Monograph**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

**IRAN AND STRATEGIC POWER PROJECTION: THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR AS A FOUNDATION OF UNDERSTANDING** by Colonel Darric M. Knight, USMC, 58 pages

This effort attempts to provide the reader with an understanding of the dynamics and rational context for Iranian Strategic power projection in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Using the Iran-Iraq War as a lens through which to examine Iran during a stressing conventional conflict, the research illustrates a number of characteristics and trends still representative of the regime today.

The monograph first defines terms of reference, introduces a variation of the DIME methodology, posits Iranian strategic objectives and provides the requisite cultural and historical background to highlight traits, characteristics and beliefs germane to the argument. The introduction of religion into the DIME construct for understanding the elements of national power and their employment is critical to this argument. In Muslim nations, particularly Iran, Islam is thoroughly ingrained in diplomatic/political, information, military and economic power while also a separate, valid element of national power. A discussion of four broad based strategic objectives follows. Of note, Islamic legitimacy is posited as a strategic objective. This concept is one of many that make Iran unique and forces the Western-influenced geopolitical thinker to re-evaluate his perspectives when dealing with Muslim countries in general and Iran in particular. The cultural and historical background provides a number of topics relevant to Iranian strategic power projection to include geopolitical history, economics, religion and the revolution. From this foundation, the monograph moves to some specific events in the Iran-Iraq War.

The monograph examines the Iran-Iraq War through three events, the 1982 decision to conduct the counteroffensive into Iraq, the arms-for-hostages affair and the 1986 Fao offensive. Through these three events, the reader discovers the effects of factional internal politics, Islamic revolutionary diplomacy and the use of Islam as a tool of power projection. Showing the impact of these events on the war, the monograph asserts that Iran did not develop the ways and means to achieve their strategic ends, and that the three events described form a causal linkage whereby each event sets the conditions for the ones that follow eventually leading to defeat.

The conclusion contends that the continued existence of the revolutionary regime was more important than winning the war. The dynamics and rational context for 21<sup>st</sup> century Iranian strategic power projection are addressed through the four strategic objectives.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Vignette

Major General Mike Kelly, Commanding General 1st Marine Division, chuckles to himself as he takes the binoculars out of his eyes. “You will return to Lebanon, I promise you....” He laughed and shook his head when Yoshi Aran told him this over beers in the Club when both were Captains in the mid nineties attending Amphibious Warfare School. “Never happen Yoshi, that’s your backyard and your problem...” As he said those words so many years ago, he still remembers thinking to himself, “I’ve had a belly full of the Middle East. I don’t need to return to Lebanon where so many of my brothers died when I was just a nineteen year old Lance Corporal...but if I do, I hope like hell it’s not as a peace keeper...”

“Be careful what you wish for...,” He thought as he again laughed. It was 2021 and General Kelly was standing on top of hill 302. Yoshi knew what he was talking about, even back in 1995. Yoshi had been part of the 1982 invasion and subsequent occupation. He knew Hezbollah after years of fighting them, study and reflection. Yoshi understood that Hezbollah would continue to gain military capability and political legitimacy. He intuitively recognized that the political vacuum in Lebanon and the chaos and opportunity it inspired, was prime real estate for the newly minted Islamic Republic of Iran. As a student of Middle Eastern geopolitics, Yoshi had seen the nuances of Iranian power projection in Lebanon before most. He had caught on to the spread of Iranian revolutionary Islamic ideals, social, cultural and political networks, humanitarian efforts, and most assuredly the conventional and asymmetric military actions taken through Hezbollah and other militant Muslim organizations. Seeing the threads of Islam woven throughout Hezbollah’s every action, he came to understand both the tangible and intangible aspects of Iranian power.

Kelly looked down and spied a clearly marked Iranian small arms ammo box. He kicked it violently and grumbled, “How did we get here?” But he knew well enough how U.S. Marines

had returned to Lebanon in 2021. Based on Yoshi's daunting prophesy and his own multiple tours in the Middle East as a company and field grade officer, he had done his own self study. He traced the multiple events spanning decades that brought him to this hilltop.

He sat down, pulled out his half chewed cigar from his breast pocket, stuffed it in his mouth and began to think. He figured most would posit that the rapid withdrawal from Iraq in the winter of '09, responding to the popular mandate and election of '08, was the catalyst for the current situation. The withdrawal of the U.S. caused a power vacuum in Iraq that Iran filled. They were able to effectively support a Shiite dominated Islamic government that managed to keep the Nation together. The loss of U.S. credibility throughout the Middle East allowed for the commensurate rise in Iranian prestige. This shift in the balance of power reduced American access and influence in the region. Iran focused on securing its immediate borders with Iraq, and thus protecting the regime, developing its economy, seeking regional hegemony and increasing its Islamic legitimacy with both Sunni and Shia. They did this through a continuous stream of vitriolic policy and terror by proxy towards Israel while also exporting humanitarian, social and cultural resources throughout the Muslim world. Economically, they had increased their self sufficiency, particularly in the arms industry, and managed to gain the lead role in the Organization of Oil Exporting Countries (OPEC). Through astute diplomatic maneuvers, violence executed by proxies and overt threats, they had managed to wrest leadership from the Saudis and control the price of oil to their advantage. When their leadership role in OPEC was consolidated, the Iranian sponsored Shia violence in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and random acts of terror in other OPEC nations ceased. With rising economic capabilities, they built up their military power in the Persian Gulf and improved their offensive ballistic and cruise missile forces, laying claim to more islands in the Straits of Hormuz and militarizing them.

Kelly reckoned that conventional wisdom would posit that Iranian power was most acutely felt in Lebanon and the Gaza strip. And from where he sat chewing his cigar, he admitted that conventional wisdom was probably correct. But he knew the current situation with

Hezbollah attacking Israel from the North while Hamas attacked from Gaza began with more than the assassination of an Israeli diplomat in China and escalating violence along the borders. In fact, the Iranian quest hegemony began long before the '79 revolution. However, a number of critical elements and characteristics of post-revolutionary Iranian power projection were formulated, developed and executed during the Iran-Iraq War and honed through their support for Hezbollah.

“Sir, MEF on the line....they’re looking for a SITREP...,” his driver yelled from the vehicle. Kelly spat and got up to the sound of his joints creaking under the weight of his age and body armor. He remembered his last conversation with the boss, “...the Iranian government is trying to arrange a ceasefire....” “Hell, maybe they were...,” he thought while at the same time their Revolutionary Guards were advising the fighters here in Lebanon, their embassy was facilitating arms shipments and more Revolutionary Guards were controlling the triggers of missiles pointed at Europe and points beyond.

He scanned the scene one more time. He saw the intricately fortified, tactically sound defensive positions, well-fed and equipped bodies of the dead Hezbollah fighters and the location where the suicide bomber met his fate. Apparently, Hezbollah had left some women and children here, so as the Marines were consolidating this position and attempting to aide the civilians, they had ignited their payloads, killing five Marines. He shook his head and starting walking down the hill. He had to hand it to the Iranians. If successful here, then they receive some of the credit and spoils, and if not, then they avoid blame. For any endeavor that threatens the destruction of Israel enhances their credibility in the region and among Muslims. “I reckon they figured the intersection of opportunity and capability had occurred. They have their own logic, I sure hope we figure it out before we come to a nuclear exchange.....”



## Thesis and Organization

The preceding vignette provides a glimpse of a hypothetical Iranian strategic power projection scenario in the early 21st century. It also introduces some of the history and characteristics of Iranian power projection and their potential strategic intent over time. What the vignette did not address were the critical elements and characteristics of Iranian post-revolutionary power projection efforts. This effort attempts to analyze the Iran-Iraq War, providing the lens from which to observe and understand Iranian strategic power projection in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The examination of key Iranian events in the Iran-Iraq War (I-IW) provides significant insights and contextual understanding into the dynamics and rationality of Iranian strategic power projection in the 21st century. Specifically, viewing the I-IW through three distinct events – the decision to invade Iraq in 1982, the arms-for-hostages deal, and the Fao offensive of 1986 – demonstrated the significance of internal politics in strategic power projection, the failure of conventional military operations to attain strategic objectives, the tension between revolutionary and pragmatic<sup>1</sup> Iranian diplomacy, and the unique characteristics of the Iranian state.

This work is organized in three distinct sections, methodology and background, analysis of the I-IW, and the conclusion. The first chapter will address specific definitions and explain some concepts of power projection to provide a foundation to the reader. A description of posited Iranian strategic objectives will follow. This chapter will conclude with a brief historical background of Iran to provide an understanding of some characteristics and unique features of the theocratic regime germane to power projection. With the methodology and background established, this work moves to an exploration of the I-IW through a specific lens.

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<sup>1</sup> Pragmatic in this sense refers to pragmatism from an Iranian perspective, as the rationality of a particular system will define what is best for that particular system. The term does not imply pragmatic from a Western, nation-state point of view.

The specific lenses used allow the reader to understand Iranian power projection from a conventional military perspective in large scale regional conflict. The specific events in chapter II provide a refined insight without attempting to describe in detail eight years of conflict involving both regional and international players. The chapter begins with the decision to invade Iraq after two years fighting to regain lost territory and concludes in a discussion of the Iranian defeat. Between these two events, the chapter addresses the arms-for-hostages deal and the Fao offensive. By providing a chronological progression, the chapter describes a causal linkage between events and clearly shows the themes of Iranian strategic power projection that still resonate today. The I-IW provides contextual foundation for many of the characteristics of Iranian power projection

The conclusion describes some key insights in the I-IW and applies those insights to form an understanding of the dynamics of the regime. Iranian strategic power projection is complex, multi-faceted, steeped in Islam and possessed of a unique rationality. Having examined the Iranian power projection in the I-IW, a contextual understanding from which to understand their actions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century become clearer. While not predictive, the final chapter allows the reader to understand Iranian actions and see the trends in their external behavior. With the rough structure of this monograph established, the next step involves articulating some key concepts and definitions while also investigating the history, character and unique aspects of the regime germane to the argument.

## **Chapter I Methodology and Background**

Expanding on the introduction, this chapter provides a macro view of the ideas found in this argument and sets the foundation for the analysis of this work. Specifically, this section will define strategic power projection, explain the elements of national power as they relate to Iran, define Iranian strategic objectives and describe some characteristics of Iranian history and culture germane to the argument.

Power projection is most often thought of in terms of military power. The current Department of Defense (DOD) definition supports this. “The ability of a nation to apply all or some of its elements of national power – political, economic, information, or military – to rapidly and effectively deploy and sustain forces in and from multiple dispersed locations to respond to crises, to contribute to deterrence, and to enhance regional stability.”<sup>2</sup> This definition neither reflects the differences between tangible and intangible elements of power, nor does it recognize that power projection does not necessarily have to involve the active use of military force. If the Department of State were to build a school in a foreign nation to promote U.S. ideals and host nation educational requirements, would it fit in this definition? No, it would not. Thus, in this paper the term power projection will be used to reflect those tangible and intangible elements of national power a state employs to influence or compel a rival state to support the attainment of its own national objectives.

The term strategic in this context implies as emanating or derived from the nation. It is both at the policy level of government and below. Strategic in this context speaks to actions taken in support of national policy objectives. The term does not imply that all decisions stem from the strategic level. For as described in the Iranian case, power can emanate from many different sources within the government. The term strategic power projection then implies any employment of tangible or intangible elements of national power by an actor or agency of a

sovereign state to influence or compel another to support its own national objectives. As the definition of strategic power projection has been fit to apply to Iran, so too will the elements of that power.

The acronym DIME is widely used within U.S. DOD to describe the elements of national power. As noted above, they are diplomacy, information, military and economics. For the U.S., all elements of power projection are captured in these four areas. However, for Iran and perhaps other Muslim states, the acronym must be altered to include the power of religion. The justification refers to the understanding that in Iran, there is no diplomacy, information, military or economic policy that is not directly or indirectly influenced by religion. Not only is Islam integrated throughout the DIME model in the Iranian case, it also stands alone as an additional element of national power.

Because Western nations no longer export religion as a function of national power, this concept may prove difficult to accept. From a Western, secular perspective, religion is a personal choice and separate from state functioning. From a Muslim perspective, particularly Iranian, Islam is the very foundation of the state and as such has a literal and, according to the Quran, obligatory requirement to be exported to provide more converts.<sup>3</sup> As an example, the U.S. would not sponsor a religious school overseas. That is a function of private charity or enterprise, regardless of whether the school were teaching capitalism or democracy and thereby supporting our national strategic objectives. Iran on the other hand, clearly supports the establishment of religious schools with extensive, clear resource and ideological streams back to Iran. Islam is more than a religion, political system or belief. It is a way of life and permeates every aspect of an Islamic state. Islam is all these things combined and also possessed of personal and national

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<sup>2</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, JP 1-02, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 12 April 2001, updated through 13 Jun 2007)

<sup>3</sup> The effort here is not to get into a religious argument or change the DIME model. Rather it is to describe the nature of Islam as a source of legitimate national power beyond a state's borders and introduce the tangible and intangible aspects of Islam as tools of power projection.

identity characteristics. For example, even after the revolutionary quest for pan-Islamic revolution began to fade and morph into ‘Islam in one Country,’ “Iran’s new leaders continued to treat Islam as the preeminent weapon for the world’s exploited people to use against the great powers.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, Islam stands as a separate element of national power and is critical in understanding Iran’s strategic objectives.

Iranian strategic objectives are at once both pragmatic and revolutionary. A macro perspective of Iran’s history, culture, actions and policies both before and after the 1979 revolution lead to the following strategic goals: security of both its borders and regime; regional hegemony; Islamic credibility; and economic independence and development.<sup>5</sup> Actions to secure their borders and maintain the regime have been both practical and ideological. Maintaining internal and external security is straight forward for a nation state. However, the manifestations of that objective have at times been driven by both pragmatic and ideological concerns. Attempting to topple the Iraqi government to install an Islamic regime through conventional military actions was clearly ideological. From the period after the war to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iranian actions to secure its border regions have taken a much more pragmatic bent. Shaul Bakhash states that Iran has, “grown chary of military or open-ended entanglements along its own borders,”<sup>6</sup> since the end of the Iran-Iraq conflict

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<sup>4</sup> L. Carl Brown, ed., *Diplomacy in the Middle East, Iran’s Foreign Policy under the Islamic Republic, 1979-2000*, by Shaul Bakhash (London: IB Tauris & Co Ltd., 2004), 248.

<sup>5</sup> The author has not viewed a definitive example of current Iranian strategic objectives. However, based on research and analysis, this rather broad list captures the majority of Iran’s geopolitical aims and explains many of their actions and contextual rationale. However, given the nature of Iran’s current regime with many factions, competing agendas and multiple power centers, difficulty and uncertainty remain in assessing Iran’s strategic objectives. Additionally, internal security of the regime will not be discussed in this work. However, analysis of Iranian factional politics, the perceived role as an example of theocratic rule, diplomatic relations with other countries, et al all point to the significance of maintaining the regime.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, ed, 255. Numerous examples of Iran’s mediation rather than military participation in Muslim struggles in border regions.

“Whether Iran existed as ‘the first world state,’ a ‘buffer state,’ or an ‘independent nation state,’ its rulers aspired to playing [sic] the leading role in the Persian Gulf.”<sup>7</sup> The ebb and flow of actual Iranian influence and exerted power has existed since ancient times, but the perception of rightful Iranian leadership in the Gulf has remained continuous to the present. The occupation of Bahrain from the 3d century AD to 1783, the occupation of Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunbs<sup>8</sup> in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the tension and war over the Shat al’Arab all contribute to both the perception and reality of Iranian dominance in the region. The almost continuous calls for the termination of outside influence<sup>9</sup> clearly denote the significance placed on their perceived role in the Gulf. While the quest for regional dominance is soundly understood in Western geopolitical thought and rests easily on the practical side of foreign policy, Iran’s actions to achieve a leadership role have been both pragmatic and revolutionary. In the immediate post-revolutionary period, examples of revolutionary zeal in the pursuit of this objective are legion.<sup>10</sup> While some would argue that their revolutionary zeal to influence change and enhance Iranian power in the Gulf has moderated, other Gulf countries still see the hand of Iran in potentially nefarious political activities.<sup>11</sup>

The strategic objective of economic independence and development also shows signs of both the pragmatic and revolutionary and possessed of historical significance. From the pragmatic perspective, “[a]s the life blood of the Iranian economy, oil has affected every aspect of life in Iran from 1908...”<sup>12</sup> The development of the oil industry gave rise to Iran’s power during the Shah’s reign and sustains the clerical regime today. Khomeini stated that, “[t]he

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<sup>7</sup> Rouholla K. Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf: Iran’s Role*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1972), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunbs are islands of strategic value in the Persian Gulf.

<sup>9</sup> Robin Wright, “Tehran Both Warns and Reassures the U.S.,” *The Washington Post*, 15 May 2007, p11.

<sup>10</sup> Stirring Shia political unrest in Bahrain, bombings in Kuwait, insulting diplomatic overtures to Saudi Arabia, et al.

<sup>11</sup> Borzou Daragahi, “Strategic Rift in Bahrain’s Royal Court,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 07 Jul 2007.

industry is the life line of the nation.”<sup>13</sup> Iran since the revolution, despite the ideological outcry over the dependence on oil, continued to seek and, “...occupy a leading place in the international oil market,”<sup>14</sup> generally operating within the constraints of OPEC and international commerce.<sup>15</sup> With historical roots dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ideological point of view holds the perception that previous rulers had, “mortgaged the nation’s economy to foreign interests”<sup>16</sup> to stay in power. Dependence on foreign corporations and the perception of inequitable trade relationships allowed the economy to be seen not just in financial terms but as a struggle for political independence.<sup>17</sup> The revolution exacerbated these perceptions of selling the country to foreigners.”<sup>18</sup> With foreign involvement in the economy carrying powerful historical and revolutionary baggage,<sup>19</sup> the development and independence of the Iranian economy is clearly a vital strategic interest.

While the three previous objectives postulated have a clear rational basis to the secular, Western political scientist, Islamic credibility or legitimacy poses problems. If one understands or accepts as postulated here that Islam is not just a belief, but a way of life that permeates each individual and an entire nation, then the concept becomes a bit easier to grasp. Thus a short explanation is needed, for “no one [can] understand the diplomatic strategy of a state if he has not studied the philosophy of those who govern it.”<sup>20</sup> Or in Iran’s case the “theosophy”<sup>21</sup> of those who govern it. According to Ramazani, Khomeini’s foundation of the Islamic world order is the

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<sup>12</sup> Rouholla K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1986), 197.

<sup>13</sup> Rouholla Khomeini, *FBIS/SA*, 01 June 1982, vol 8, no. 105; quoted in R.K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, 206.

<sup>14</sup> Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, 207.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 207-213.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, ed., 257.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>20</sup> Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), p. 325; quoted in R.K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 23.

rule of the leading juris prudent (vilayat-e faqih). The vilayat (rulership) runs from God to Mohamad, the Imams, and finally to the learned and pious faqih, manifest in the supreme ruler who reigns until the arrival of the Mahdi (Messiah). The faqih sets the conditions for Mahdi's creation of just Muslim governments throughout the world. Because the rule of the faqih, established in only one country, only Iran is uniquely qualified to pave the way for the establishment of a world government by the Messiah.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Iran since the revolution has the obligation to spread justice throughout the world and liberate mankind. Further, as Islam recognizes no boundaries, the idea of the post-Westphalian nation state is an anachronism. Upon liberation in this borderless globe, a just and equitable government for the world's oppressed masses (mosta'zafin) will emerge.

Accordingly, revolutionary Iran perceives itself as the center of the Islamic world and gives it righteous justification to pursue geopolitical means that most Western and other nations have come to find abhorrent, such as hostage taking, terrorism, assassination, etc. From an ideological point of view and in many ways a rational point of view, Islamic credibility is the foundation of all post-revolutionary action and the vision for the future. The objective of Iranian Islamic credibility helps explain the uniqueness of Iranian strategic power projection and clearly links the tangible and intangible concepts of Islam as not only the very foundation, but also a key tool in the elements of national power. With an explanation of Iran's asserted strategic objectives, and consequently the basis for their strategic power projection efforts established, a brief description of other unique facets of Iranian history and culture further enhance the understanding of Iran's strategic context.

## **Historical and Cultural Background**

The history and culture that make Iran unique among its neighbors and germane to strategic power projection are its Persian culture, Shiism, relations with foreign powers and the

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<sup>22</sup> Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, 19-20.



Islamic revolution. The linkage between current Iranian strategic power projection and Persian culture and history are both tangible and intangible. 2500<sup>23</sup> plus years of empire and/or civilization have forged the boundaries of an ethnically diverse nation. Iran's ethnic Persians encompass only 51%<sup>24</sup> of the population, forcing the current regime to pay close attention to the political and ethnic divisions within the country. Historically, tribal politics have played an important role in every significant Iranian dynasty from 945 through 1925. N.R. Keddie, Iranian historian, contends that, "...the impact of this large semiautonomous, and ...powerful group of tribes on Iranian life and politics has yet to be appreciated,"<sup>25</sup> and that during periods of weak or decentralized governance, "...these entities continue to assert their autonomy even today."<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the focus on internal politics and the potential for decentralization giving way to autonomous action remain important aspects of the current regime.

Also significant are the intangible aspects of Persian history on the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Iran's quest "to become the superpower of the Persian Gulf,"<sup>27</sup> as asserted by Gary Sick, has roots in the extensive history of Iran's ebb and flow of greatness in the region. Persia's long struggle with the Ottoman Empire has also had a clear and important impact on the theocratic regime and the geopolitical situation in the region. Keddie suggests that the numerous conflicts with the Ottomans during the Safavid era (1501-1722) gave rise for the requirement to develop a unique Persian-Shia ideological distinction and identity as a bulwark against their rival Sunnis. The Safavid rulers encouraged conversion to Shiism to strengthen the religious identity of Iran, creating "... a clear line of political demarcation and hostility between Twelver Shiism

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<sup>23</sup> Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf: Iran's Role*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Christine C. Fair, *Iran: What Future for the Islamic State?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Project Air Force, 2002), 211.

<sup>25</sup> Keddie, 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Gary Sick, "Iran's Quest for Superpower Status," *Foreign Affairs*, 44, no. 2 (Spring 1987).

and Sunnism.”<sup>28</sup> The predominance of Shiism and the Shia-Sunni split play a significant role in the IRI’s projection of power and further highlights Iran’s uniqueness.

A number of Shia characteristics have considerable influence in the IRI’s internal governance, identity and strategic power projection. In fact, “[f]rom 1501 until this century, Iran and Shiism were for many people part of a single blend.”<sup>29</sup> Specifically, the historical Shia religious-political linkage, the perception and requirement of Iran as the epicenter of Shiism and the concepts of “oppressed versus oppressor” and martyrdom as an esteemed individual act all contribute to the dynamics of Iranian strategic power projection.

The religious-political linkage is best described through the mujtahid, “a legal and theological scholar whose intelligence, training and following qualified him to make judgments on a range of questions.”<sup>30</sup> In Twelver Shiism, a requirement exists to interpret current legal, temporal, religious and secular issues with a degree of trustworthy judgment until the return of the messiah. While the mujtahids were fallible, they commanded respect that grew over time. The ulamma (clerics) also developed economic power and independence from the Shah through *vaqfs* (endowments) and certain religious taxes. Each individual Shia had to follow one particular, living mujtahid. Mujtahids “strove...to know the infallible will of the Twelfth Iman...,”<sup>31</sup> establishing a doctrinal basis for political power over the heads of state and giving the ulamma much more political clout as compared to their Sunni counter parts.<sup>32</sup> The historical foundation of mujtahids in Shiism combined with Khomeini’s concept of rule of the leading juris prudent (*vilayat-e faqih*), give Iran its unique system of governance. This system allows the head of state/supreme ruler the ability to make geopolitical decisions on both religious and pragmatic

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<sup>28</sup> Keddie, 11-13.

<sup>29</sup> Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf: Iran’s Role*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Keddie, 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 15-16 and 20. Keddie points out that the mujtahid, while fallible were still less fallible than any temporal ruler and that mujtahid could claim to make political decisions provided they touched on Islamic principles.

foundations, leading to unpredictable, seemingly erratic and at times contradictory projections of power in support of strategic objectives.

The perception and reality of Iran as the rightful home of Shiism is also critical to Iranian identity and geopolitics. Prior to the invasion of Persia by Sunni Afghans in 1722, Isfahan was the Shia capitol. The ulamma moved to the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in Ottoman Iraq after the invasion, where the theological capital stayed until recently.<sup>33</sup> Based on their theocratic regime and Khomeini's 'theosophy,' it is imperative for Iranian identity and the legitimacy of the IRI to gain and maintain the Shia center of gravity, "...to ensure Iran's strategic relevance among the Shia community..."<sup>34</sup> in particular, and the greater Muslim community in general.

Another important aspect of Shiism is represented in the concept of martyrdom.<sup>35</sup> The emulation of martyr figures actually pre-dates Islamic times in Iran.<sup>36</sup> In the Shia religion, the concept of martyrdom began with the deaths of the Imams Ali and his son Husayn. Commemorated annually, the martyrdom of Husayn in Karbala centuries ago provides gory images of self flagellation, blood and other aspects of religious zealotry. These occasions "...foster a culture of martyrdom that has become synonymous with Shiism."<sup>37</sup> The concept has been used to great effect by the IRI, assisting the consolidation of the regime during the I-IW,<sup>38</sup> and mobilizing youth for the war. As a tool of power projection, martyrdom was used conventionally by the Basij in human wave attacks and asymmetrically in Lebanon and elsewhere in suicide bombings. Martyrdom also provides a linkage to Shia notions of persecution and victimization at the hands of Sunnis and others.

The concept, figurative awakening and struggle of the oppressed presents yet another theme derived from Shiism that resonates both internally and externally, helping to form and hold

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>34</sup> Fair, 237.

<sup>35</sup> This does not imply that Shiism is the only religion that honors self sacrifice for a higher cause.

<sup>36</sup> Keddie, 3.

together the fabric, or the rationality of Iranian power projection. Khomeini provided one aspect of his vision of the Islamic republic and world as an image of struggle between the meek versus the strong and good versus evil, gaining “militant populist”<sup>39</sup> appeal both internally and outside Iran’s borders. In so doing, his “‘Islamic revival’...follow[ed] a long tradition in both Iran and the Muslim world of expressing socioeconomic and cultural grievances...[through]...a religious idiom arraying the forces of good against the forces of evil and promising to bring justice to the oppressed.”<sup>40</sup> Through this messianic vision, he crystallized popular support for the revolution, mobilized hundreds of thousands for service in the Pasdaran<sup>41</sup> and Basij to wage the I-IW and provide internal security, and inflamed ideological passions throughout the Middle East, particularly among the Shia. As a result, this Islamic vision of the oppressed became a tool of strategic power projection and reinforces the concept of Islam as an element of national power.

Iran’s geopolitical history regarding relations with world powers created conditions for the characteristic bitterness and mistrust toward the U.S., and other Western governments, evidenced in the current regime and reflected in their strategic power projection. Viewed from a nationalist, anti-imperialistic Iranian perspective, Iran has had few, if any, positive, fair foreign relations with a global power outside the Middle East in its pre-revolutionary history. Iran’s first experience came in the early 1500s when Portugal seized Hormuz Island in the Gulf. After over 100 years of occupation, Iran unseated the Portuguese with British assistance. Britain’s entry into the region evolved into the ‘Great Game’ of imperialistic influence in the Middle East and South West Asia; a geopolitical competition involving, in Iran, primarily Russia and England. The British sought political and economic influence and the establishment of and security for lines of communication to and from India. Russia pursued unencumbered political and economic

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<sup>37</sup> Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media and Martyrdom in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 51.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>39</sup> Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Keddie, 3.

influence in Northern Iran and the potential for a warm water port. Both wanted, "...to forestall control of Iran,...take further territory...or make [it] a protectorate...by the other party."<sup>42</sup> A broad brush representation of the Qajar dynasty (1796-1925) could be characterized by unequal economic practices, demand for "free trade,"<sup>43</sup> extraterritoriality, and significant trade concessions to foreign powers and individuals;<sup>44</sup> in a phrase, unfettered imperialism with all its negative connotations. Through World War II British imperialist policies and actions continued apace, while Russia renounced almost all of her Tsarist economic concessions after the Bolshevik revolution, but continued to exert influence and take action through Iranian nationalists, trade unions and the Iranian communist Tudeh party. However, the discovery of oil in 1908, the establishment of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (AIOC),<sup>45</sup> the exceptionally favorable British economic advantage that went with it and the rise of Iranian nationalist sentiments further intensified the perception of undue foreign involvement and lack of Iranian political and economic independence.

These issues came to a head when the Iranian government led by Mosaddeq, the popular nationalist premier, nationalized the Iranian oil industry. The ensuing world boycott of Persian oil weakened Mosaddeq's coalition government and had deleterious effects on the economy and

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<sup>41</sup> Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution. Also known as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

<sup>42</sup> Keddie, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Keddie, 42. "On the economic side, free trade was forced on Asia even before it was accepted in the nineteenth-century bastion of free trade, Great Britain. Free trade might benefit a Britain whose advanced industries produced cheaper goods than did those of the rest of the world, but in Asia, including Iran, forced low tariffs had a disruptive effect."

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 37-72. From Keddie p. 54: "The most extensive concession ever granted by Iran, and perhaps by any country, came in 1872 when British subject Baron Julius de Reuter, of news agency fame, received a concession granting exclusive rights for railroad and streetcar construction, all mineral-extraction rights, except for a few already being exploited, all unexploited irrigation works, a national bank, and all sorts of industrial and agricultural products, in return for a modest royalty and initial sum. Lord Curzon, himself a firm economic and political imperialist, later called it the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands..."

<sup>45</sup> Later the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) and later still, the British Petroleum (BP) Company.

populace.<sup>46</sup> U.S. cold war fears of Iran siding with the Soviets and support of the British/AIOC position on the oil issue led to a British approved, U.S. supported coup in August 1953, placing Mohammad Reza Shah back in complete control of the government. U.S. involvement in the coup was seen by the nationalists, not just as an act of geopolitical intrigue by an old enemy, but as betrayal.<sup>47</sup> Positive American sentiments were expressed by Mosaddeq and other nationalists based on U.S. ideals, more favorable trade arrangements with U.S. companies, requests for U.S. economic aide and as a hedge or balance against British interests. As a result, U.S. actions created a perception of treachery that still echoes today.

The coup transformed the U.S. into the “dominant foreign power in Iran”<sup>48</sup> and paved the way for Mohammad Reza Shah’s increasingly secular, repressive and dictatorial regime. Ignoring constitutionally mandated representative governance, the Shah embarked on a path “...modernizing Iran’s economy and society, and ...making the country Western in character and militarily strong,...creating a long-term dependence on Western countries, especially the U.S.”<sup>49</sup> U.S. support for the Shah’s regime was based on cold war politics and more importantly on “economic and strategic resources vital to the West.”<sup>50</sup> Not until the Shah manipulated the 1973 spike in oil prices via OPEC did the U.S. press and certain officials shift slightly towards a questioning view of the Shah’s regime.

From the geopolitical historical review, understanding Iranian bitterness, mistrust and animosity towards the West becomes easier and helps shape the Iranian strategic context. The ideas and concepts flowing from this negative geopolitical history are captured in the writings of modern Iranian philosophers and the oft repeated refrain, “neither East, nor West, only the

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<sup>46</sup> Keddie, 127.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 133-4.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 133.

Islamic Republic.”<sup>51</sup> Jalal Al-Ahmad wrote of “‘Westoxification;’ I speak of being afflicted with ‘Westitis’ the way I would speak of being afflicted with cholera.”<sup>52</sup> Roots of unequal treatment at the hands of the West also resonate in writings from Ali Shariati, reputedly the ideologist of the Iranian Revolution,<sup>53</sup> articulating a return to Muslim identity, martyrdom and the disadvantaged masses against their oppressors. These ideas helped fuel the revolution and still resonate today in internal politics when leaders try to “rouse public opinion for or against various candidates or political factions by asserting that the people would not vote for “an American Islam” or for those who would be “soft” on America.”<sup>54</sup>

The catch phrase, “Neither East, nor West, only the Islamic republic,” is more than a slogan uttered in revolutionary student protests and has not lost significance with the demise of the Soviet Union and the evolution to a uni-polar world. Rather it forms one of the pillars of Khomeini’s ideological foundation. “The rejection of the role of the superpowers is not a matter of balancing or playing off one power against the other; it is, rather, an aspect of the unyielding insistence on the doctrine of “Islamic self-reliance.” It is fundamentally a reflection of the ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic world order.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, these ideas stemming from history, propelled the revolution, colored and continue to drive Iran’s internal political environment and strongly influence their strategic power projection. However, the Iranian Revolution was

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<sup>51</sup> Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Jalal Al-Ahmad, *Gharbzadighi [Westoxification]*, (Tehran: Azad, 1962), p. 27; quoted in Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls*, 8. Full quote: “...If this is not palpable let us say it is akin to being stricken by heat or cold. But it is not that either. It is something more on the order of being attacked by tongue worm. Have you ever seen how wheat rots? From within. In any case we are dealing with an illness, a disease imported from abroad and developed in an environment receptive to it.”

<sup>53</sup> Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, 21.

<sup>54</sup> Brown, ed., 249. Shaul Bakhash states that Supreme leader Khamenei used these tactics in the 1996 parliamentary elections and the 1997 presidential elections. I contend that these conditions and characterizations are still present in Iranian internal politics. Full quote: “...Twenty years after the revolution, conservatives were still trying to taint their opposition with the “American” or “Western” brush. Such rhetoric used in part for domestic political advantage, nevertheless bred an environment hostile to normal relations with European countries and America.”

<sup>55</sup> Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, 21.

complex and and unique. Multiple factors influenced its genesis, execution and resultant political dynamics.

The Iranian Islamic revolution was a remarkable confluence of social, cultural, historical, economic and political events, characters and times. The purpose here is not to provide a holistic description of the revolution and its impact on power projection; rather it is to show the genesis and introduce the impact of the ever present factionalism in Iranian internal politics and connect that concept to strategic power projection.

Based on the diverse nature of the opposition, Khomeini applied astute political instincts and balanced competing interests to maintain the focus and cohesion of the divergent elements – students, intellectuals, clergy, Marxists, communists, et al – both prior to and during the revolution. However, upon unseating the Shah, while he emphasized the Islamic nature of the post-revolutionary regime, he failed to conceptualize and effectively articulate exactly how the Islamic nature of the government would take form in terms of specific policies driving the mechanisms of state – free market or state controlled economy, pragmatic or revolutionary foreign policy, state attitudes towards the West, etc. Each competing ideological camp – religious, populist, revolutionary<sup>56</sup> - possessed their own valid, authentic interpretation of the Islamic State. Khomeini managed the factional balance of power and ideological tensions while alive by changing opinions on critical topics and providing differing and often conflicting views on the meaning of a truly Islamic state. He did this to ensure the continued existence of the Islamic system as a whole.<sup>57</sup>

However, while Khomeini's delicate balancing and deliberate taciturn behavior regarding major issues facilitated governance when alive, it actually increased the level of factionalism after his death. In addition, the constitutionally enabled hierarchical distribution of power did and still

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<sup>56</sup> Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post Khomeini Iran*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press: 2002), 3

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 4.



allows for strong agencies to dominate those deemed of lesser stature or secondary importance.<sup>58</sup>

As a result, final policy is often decided by which faction “controls the responsible organization or ministry.”<sup>59</sup> The friction created by the ideological dissonance on the true nature of the Islamic state brought about the complex factional internal politics seen today. This condition, combined with “multiple [competing] centers of power and sources of authority”<sup>60</sup> facilitate the complex dynamics that define the strategic power projection efforts seen in the I-IW.

This chapter has defined terms of reference, introduced the concept of DIME-I to explain the elements of national power with emphasis on the notions of the Islamic religion as a basis of power; postulated and justified Iranian strategic objectives; and explained how culture, religion, foreign relations and the revolution generated unique characteristics of the Islamic state that significantly influence past and current strategic power projection efforts. The next chapter captures how these characteristics actually influenced the execution of strategic power projection.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 6.

## Chapter II: The Iran-Iraq War

### Introduction

Arguably, the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 was a very fortuitous event for the IRI. The I-IW allowed Khomeini to consolidate the regime politically, economically, and socially and focused the attention and energies of the revolutionary nation. The war also became the ideal stage for the manifestation of the revolutionary, religious and historical themes previously presented. Religious legitimacy, self-sufficiency, the export of revolutionary ideas, the quest for regional hegemony, the sanctity of the Islamic regime, et al were intimately woven into the fabric of the war. As such, “[t]he war and the revolution had merged; support for the two had become so intertwined as to make them indistinguishable.”<sup>61</sup> Wrapped in a conventional military conflict, the war was a confluence of revolutionary, religious and cultural ideas and actions. This unique form of Iranian strategic power projection, captured in the DIME-I construct, was complex and encompassed many dimensions. Consequently, specific areas of focus are required.

This chapter will address the I-IW through three distinct events – the 1982 decision to invade Iraq, the arms-for-hostages deal with the U.S. and the 1986 Fao offensive. Specifically, examination of these events will illustrate how the use of Islam as an element of national power, factionalized internal politics and friction between revolutionary and pragmatic diplomacy shaped Iranian strategic power projection. Of the three, the 1982 decision was by far the most significant as it set the conditions for those events that followed. This analysis contends that these influences on the ways and means of strategic power projection adversely affected Iranian attainment of their wartime strategic ends and provided several significant lessons for 21<sup>st</sup> century Iran.

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<sup>61</sup> Efraim Karsh, ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications*, Iran and the War: From Stalemate to Ceasefire, by Shahram Chubin (NY: St Martin’s Press 1989), 15.

The 1982 decision to continue the war and invade Iraq shows the internal division between the Pasdaran and regular army, the power of Islam in the mobilization, inculcation and execution of the war and the dominance of revolutionary ideology in IRI diplomacy. The arms-for-hostages deal demonstrates an element of the causal linkage stemming from the 1982 decision, the requirement for practical diplomacy and the continuing influence of internal political friction on the war. The Fao offensive represents the highpoint of the Iranian war effort. Breaking the stalemate and clearly evincing the offensive power of Islam combined with conventional military capability, the initially successful offensive caused a wave of anxiety to spread regionally and internationally over a potential Iranian victory in the war. Forming yet another link in the causal chain, the event provides more (evidence) to the concept that Iran did not develop the appropriate ways and means to achieve their aims, while also continuing to illustrate the adverse impact of a factionalized political system. The chapter ends with a summary of those concepts and actions that continue to be germane to Iranian strategic power projection in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the organization of the chapter in hand, the need to address the scope of the analysis and some background before delving into the examination of the 1982 decision exists.

The three above mentioned events provide the most effective views of the internal political turmoil, the use of Islam to mobilize and focus the population to execute the war and the conflict between the desire to employ Islamic revolutionary diplomacy and action, and the requirement, based on the realities of war and existence of the regime, to transition to a more pragmatic vein of foreign policy. The examples used to discuss the internal factionalism primarily relate to the bifurcation of the Iranian armed forces. The split clearly manifests the factionalism and competing centers of power within the regime. Additionally, the war itself, “as a delicate balance of incompetence”<sup>62</sup> provided few if any decisive battles or cohesive operational campaigns to achieve strategic objectives. As a result, the researcher must weave specific critical

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<sup>62</sup> Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2002), 30.

events together in hindsight to present an intelligible analysis. While the “tanker war” and “war of the cities” offer venues to examine the execution of strategic power projection, neither was decisive and those methods have not been repeated since. With the scope articulated, a brief discussion of the origins of the war and events leading to the 1982 decision can begin.

The “imposed war” as the Iranians call it could just as easily have been called the “self-imposed war.” More than a year before the war Khomeini decreed, “We have...no choice but to destroy those systems of government that are corrupt in themselves...and to overthrow all treacherous, corrupt, oppressive and criminal regimes [;][it] is a duty that all Muslims must fulfill in every one of the Muslim countries, in order to achieve the triumphant political revolution of Islam.”<sup>63</sup> From the assumption of power, the Khomeini government sought to undermine and overthrow Saddam Hussein’s Bathist regime. By supporting underground anti-government Shia organizations, renewing support for Kurdish separatists and publicly encouraging Iraqis to overthrow the secular Bathists, the IRI employed its organic form of revolutionary strategic power projection. Imbued with revolutionary zeal, Iran was also linked to multiple acts of terror and the attempted assassinations of the Iraqi Deputy Premier and Minister of information.<sup>64</sup> These events and the perceived Iranian weakness set the conditions for Iraqi intentions and action.

Saddam’s actions were based on calculated geopolitics and internal anxieties concerning the existence of his regime. The Kurdish separatist issue, the heavily Arab, Iranian province of Khuzistan in southeast Iran and the Shatt al-Arab waterway demarking the boundary and giving access to the Persian Gulf had been areas of tension for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most recent iterations prior to 1980 were settled in the 1975 Algiers Accord, whereby Iran and Iraq agreed to

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<sup>63</sup> Ruhollah Khomeini, translated by Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writing and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981); quoted in Efraim Karsh, ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications, The War and the Spread of Islamic Fundamentalism*, by Robin Wright (NY: St Martins Press, 1989), 111.

assign their boundaries “according to the thalweg<sup>65</sup> line [and] to end all infiltrations of a subversive nature.”<sup>66</sup> Saddam, then Vice President, negotiated with the Shah from a position of weakness and had to accept the Iranian conditions.<sup>67</sup> Saddam’s anxieties centered on the real and continuous existential threats to his regime and presidency.<sup>68</sup>

As a result, Saddam embarked on a limited scale war to compel Iran to cease its attempts to overthrow his regime. He hoped a quick, decisive campaign to seize the Shatt al-Arab and a small portion of Khuzistan would bring Iran to a negotiated settlement similar to the Algiers Accord with Iraq as the clear winner. By perceiving Iranian military weakness in the aftermath of the revolution and initially seeing Khomeini as a “turbaned Shah” liable to be influenced by the same type of power politics,<sup>69</sup> he believed that opportunity and his capabilities coincided. He was wrong. Hussein invaded, but stopped his invasion before the culmination of his forces and consolidated his gains.

Iran’s revolutionary regime’s perception and execution of the war was total and founded on religious and revolutionary principles. “This war is not about territory[;][i]t is a continuous confrontation between the righteous and the wicked...[and]...at stake here is the all around defense of Islam and the Muslims.”<sup>70</sup> Not having gained full legitimacy, the regime channeled the energy of the nation into repulsing the external threat, while at the same time using the war to

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 13. Attempts on the lives of Tariq Aziz and Latif Nuseif al-Jassim were made in April 1980.

<sup>65</sup> Thalweg – the median line of the deepest channel.

<sup>66</sup> Tareq Y. Ismail, *Iraq and Iran: Roots of Conflict* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 66; quoted in Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (NY: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Inc. 1991), 17.

<sup>67</sup> The 1968 Bathist coup had not been completely consolidated; its agenda had yet to be put in place in toto.

<sup>68</sup> Saddam had assumed the Presidency in July 1979, shortly after the Iranian Revolution. He like the Iranians needed to consolidate power internally and any external threat reduced his ability to do so. Additionally, as history bears out, he was concerned to the point of paranoia concerning the existence of his regime.

<sup>69</sup> Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), 26.

begin to consolidate power and suppress internal dissent. Seeing the secular Bathists as the classic “oppressor” both of the Iraqi people and the IRI, the cleric’s stated strategic objective would become and remain throughout the overthrow of Saddam’s government. Based on religious and revolutionary passion and hostility, the IRI had found the ideal rival in the secular, socialist Bath regime.

Iran’s military execution to regain lost territory mirrored its revolutionary and religious rhetoric; vehement and focused, yet still possessing internal tension. The Iranian counteroffensive, characterized by high casualties, but effective coordination between Pasdaran and the conventional army to maximize their contributions, drove the Iraqis back to the international border by May 1982.<sup>71</sup> Waging attrition warfare with the first use of human wave attacks, the Pasdaran and subordinate Basij, imbued with religious ideology and revolutionary fervor, fought with élan. The conventional army, attempting to regain lost credibility given they had been viewed as an instrument of oppression under the Shah, suffered significant purges of the officer corps and had not been “Islamized,” used combined arms planning and execution to the greatest extent possible. Not only had the army lost a significant portion of their senior leadership and trust of the government, but had also been denied their primary supplier of arms, spare parts and military technology, the U.S. The IRI also supported the intensification of the Kurdish insurgency and the anti-governmental riots in Shia-majority cities in Southern Iraq.<sup>72</sup> Iran had gained the upper hand and set the conditions for either a negotiated settlement or invasion of Iraq.

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<sup>70</sup> Translation from *Akhbaar News Service*, “General Command issues communiqué,” on *Radio Tehran*, 12 Jul 1988; quoted in Efraim Karsh, ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications, The War and the Spread of Islamic Fundamentalism*, by Robin Wright (NY: St Martins Press), 110.

<sup>71</sup> Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988*, 33-35. The early phases of the war were characterized by Pasdaran and army adamantly refusing to work together. The establishment of the Supreme Defense Council was designed to improve coordination of the war effort and centralize decision making. Headed by the President Bani Sadr, it comprised three members of the professional military and three senior mullahs. However Khomeini sacked Bani Sadr, the duly elected president in June 1981, based on disputes with the clerics and Khomeini’s need to consolidate clerical power.

<sup>72</sup> Hiro, 289.

## 1982 Decision

The IRI invaded Iraq in July 1982, setting in motion a causal chain that eventually led to its failure to attain her stated wartime objectives. However, prior to crossing the international border, not only had the tides on the battlefield shifted, but also and perhaps more importantly, the internal political dynamic facilitating the offensive use of Islam and the export of revolution became favorable. In twenty months of war, the clerical regime set the base conditions for thoroughly consolidating power. Using the war as a pretext, they justified repression of the opposition, calling them traitors, stymied debate on the meaning of the revolution, restructured and desecularized the country, gained control of the Pasdaran, eliminated rivals and replaced the Persian culture with an Islamic one.<sup>73</sup> These events and those on the battlefield denote the favorable environment allowing the decision. The decision itself highlights the factionalized internal politics of the regime, particularly as manifest in the bifurcation of the armed forces between the Pasdaran and army.<sup>74</sup> Launching the invasion also demonstrated how the regime colored all aspects of the war in religious terms, particularly the refusal to compromise and the employment of Islam to mobilize, indoctrinate and prosecute the war. Lastly, the decision illustrated the ideological desire to export the revolution in dramatic conventional fashion despite the costs. While the verdict captured the alignment of internal politics, Islamic power and revolutionary geopolitics, it failed to meaningfully address the ways and means to achieve its wartime aims. The genesis of this failure resides in the factional politics of the IRI.

The Supreme Defense Council reflected on the decision to invade Iraq for nine months.<sup>75</sup> Professional military and other political elements<sup>76</sup> argued that more armor, aircraft, heavy

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<sup>73</sup> Chubin and Tripp, 70-71.

<sup>74</sup> Pasdaran also developed naval units during the war, but for the purposes of this argument, we will focus on the split in the ground forces between the Pasdaran and army.

<sup>75</sup> Hiro, 86.

<sup>76</sup> The nature of Khomeini's regime, based on *vilayat al-fiqih*, created the rampant factionalism in the IRI. However, this factionalism is very hard to capture empirically and thus concretely, given the lack of transparency in the IRI. Exactly who or what organization makes the decision and why become

weapons and logistical capabilities were required to achieve success, and that an offensive would reduce Iran's moral standing in other Muslim countries.<sup>77</sup> Opposing this argument, supporters of the war, the Pasdaran and clerics,<sup>78</sup> argued that large infantry formations enlightened with Islamic revolutionary zeal, and a Shia uprising<sup>79</sup> in southern Iraq compensated for a lack of weapons systems and other hardware.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps more importantly, some political leaders believed, "...that national unity forged in the face of war would start to crumble once a ceasefire was agreed."<sup>81</sup> Consequently, they feared losing their grip on the reins of power if hostilities were not continued. The military professionals clearly saw the need to match specific military means to achieve the strategic ends; a westernized, linear and logic based approach. The Pasdaran felt that Islamic revolutionary ideology and the power of Islam could provide the means; a much more complex, circular and arguably Middle Eastern argument. However, the decision came down to which faction had power and the ability to exercise it in support of the internal requirements of the clerical regime vice the soundness and validity of the argument.

The competing factions in government were manifest in the literal bifurcation of the armed forces, and the decision to invade increased the esteem, influence and power of the Pasdaran at the expense of the professional army, reducing operational effectiveness in the export

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extremely difficult to discern both then and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, the rift between the Pasdaran and conventional army in the midst of a war provide an excellent example of the dynamics and manifestations of factional politics in Iran. However, it remains difficult to define the political groups advocating for or against a particular issue because the terms –hardliner, liberal, et al – don't easily translate into western concepts, without specific details and explanations that are beyond the scope of this effort. Different researchers also define the groups with different names.

<sup>77</sup> Hiro, 86.

<sup>78</sup> Exactly who supported the invasion is subject to question. I have found one author who stated the military supported the invasion and another who stated the President and Prime Minister at the time (Khomeini appointees) both advocated against continuing the war. I contend that the Pasdaran and clerics wanted to continue the war on the following grounds: 1) the theocratic regime was still consolidating power and the loss of national unity could have precluded its authoritarian means to do so; 2) The Pasdaran, as a center of revolutionary power would not have passed up the opportunity to increase its power and religious/revolutionary credibility; 3) The vehemence of Khomeini's decrees on never compromising; and 4) the ever increasing significance of the war to the legitimacy of the Islamic revolution.

<sup>79</sup> Ironically, Saddam thought that an Arab uprising in Khuzistan would similarly support his invasion.

<sup>80</sup> Hiro, 86.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 86.



of power. In spite of the army's successful planning and control of the effort to regain lost territory, the decision to launch the invasion against the opinion of military professionals was not surprising. The conventional army was viewed "...as a reflection and symbol of the country's ...dependence on the United States."<sup>82</sup> Un-trusted and marginalized with little factional backing after the removal of Bani Sadr, the army's voice in the higher echelons of government was muffled until grim circumstances requiring military professionalism allowed them to take a leading role in the planning and execution of operations with the Pasdaran. When the crisis was over, they reverted once again to second class status.

The Pasdaran on the other hand, one of a host of "revolutionary organizations which absorb[ed] resources and wield[ed] semi-autonomous power,"<sup>83</sup> held a special position within the IRI. The IRGC leadership had decreed in 1979 "...that they would take orders only from Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council...[and]...that as guardians of the religiosity of the regime, the IRGC and not the Western-trained army were the trusted armed forces in the country."<sup>84</sup> This special position translated into the huge expansion of the Pasdaran during the war to include artillery, armor and other branches formerly under the prerogative of the conventional army. This expansion combined with the creation of a separate Ministry,<sup>85</sup> which institutionalized the bifurcation of the ground forces, established a parallel, but unequal military structure to the professional army. Greater pay, better access to civilian leadership and priority on spare parts and weapons systems reflected the Pasdaran's primacy.

The methods and resources used by each force also contributed to the Islamic regime's bias towards the Pasdaran. The army emphasized planning, training, logistical sustainment and

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<sup>82</sup> Chubin and Tripp, 35.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>84</sup> Hiro, 288.

<sup>85</sup> The Ministry was established in November 1982, three months after the first failed offensive into Iraq. Based on the rising influence, power and legitimacy of the Pasdaran, I contend that the establishment of the Ministry was a result of this failure, factionalism and the animosity between the army and the Pasdaran.

other well-versed Western military concepts. The Pasdaran, more daring and reckless,<sup>86</sup> relied on ideological zeal, surprise, innovation, human wave attacks and other less traditional methods. These ways and means resonated with the clerical factions in power and fit within the context of the Islamic revolution. The clerical "...regime preferred this style of warfare: the cult of the offensive, the crusade involving the masses rather than the coldly efficient technical prosecution of warfare, and the emphasis on commitment over professionalism."<sup>87</sup> They were concerned less with outcomes than processes...[and] less with gaining victory than offering certain values and commitments."<sup>88</sup> These beliefs have a clear link to the power of Islam and provide contextual understanding of the decision to launch the invasion, and thus to the substance of Iranian strategic power projection.

The importance of Islam to the IRI cannot be understated. The ideological and tangible physical power of militant Islam was not only the glue, fiber and energy that fueled, sustained and held together the war effort and revolutionary government; it was also paramount in the decision to invade and indelibly linked to the ways and means of Iranian strategic power projection. Perceiving the war in spiritual, rather than tangible, Western-oriented terms, the IRI had seemingly little choice but to continue the war. Shortly after the Iraqi invasion, Khomeini provided the guidance that defined the stakes of the conflict stating: "You are fighting to protect Islam and he is fighting to destroy Islam...There is absolutely no question of peace or compromise and we shall never have any discussions with them..."<sup>89</sup> The ideological theme equating compromise with defeat, repeated throughout the duration of the fighting, gave little room for internal or external maneuver, and wrapped the initial decision to invade into religious

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<sup>86</sup> Chubin and Tripp, 44.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 46,

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>89</sup> Khomeini, Home Service, 20 October 1980, in *FBIS* VIII, I-I, 21 October 1980; quoted in Chubin and Tripp, 38.

terms of struggle and perseverance, "...for even if victory prove[d] impossible of attainment, Iran [would be] duty bound to continue."<sup>90</sup>

Consequently, in the methods and resources employed to attain victory, Islam also remained central through the mobilization of the devoted masses and prosecution of a new Islamic way of war.<sup>91</sup> Using the historical Shia fixation on martyrdom, going so far as to make it a state policy,<sup>92</sup> and reinforcing the Shia concept of oppressed vs. oppressor, the regime recruited the mostazafin (the oppressed) from poor rural and urban areas to fill the ranks of Basij and Pasdaran and provide the faithful Islamic masses. Elevating the concept of martyrdom as "...the 'greatest reward' of the Jihad warrior...[and]...the most lofty and honorable way to depart from this world,"<sup>93</sup> and praising the Basij as a "blessing from God,"<sup>94</sup> the regime employed a "...production of persuasion [using]...everything from print to celluloid...to illustrate the beauty of sacrifice."<sup>95</sup> The Basij constituted the oppressed masses, teenage boys given a week or so of rudimentary military training, sent to the front to fight the oppressors and hopefully validate their "Passports to Paradise."<sup>96</sup> Clearly, martyrdom was the key element in the new Islamic way of war.

Reinforcing and helping to define this idea of new "Islamic Warfare,"<sup>97</sup> Khomeini stated, "victory is not achieved by swords, it can only be achieved by blood...it is achieved by strength

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<sup>90</sup> Chubin and Tripp, 39.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>92</sup> Varzi, 47.

<sup>93</sup> Rafsanjani quoted in Haggy Rom, *Myth and Mobilization in Revolutionary Iran: the Use of the Friday Congregational Service* (Washington DC: American University Press, 1994), 73; quoted in Varzi, 56.

<sup>94</sup> Rafsanjani, 26 November 1985, in *BBC/SWB/ME*, 29 November 1985 (A/9); quoted in Chubin and Tripp, 45.

<sup>95</sup> Varzi, 56. Varzi notes that the Historical Center of the Revolutionary Guards corps possess an abundance of cassette tapes, documents, journals, et al addressing this topic.

<sup>96</sup> Karsh, *Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988*, 39. The admission forms to enter the Basij were called 'Passports to Paradise.'

<sup>97</sup> Interview in magazine *Sorush*, Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), 27 November 1982, in *BBC/SWB/ME*, 30 November 1982 (A/9), with Colonel B. Sulimaz, Deputy Commander of the 21<sup>st</sup> Division: "We are going to write our own (military) manuals, with absolutely new tactics that the

of faith.”<sup>98</sup> In abundant supply in 1982, blood and faith captured the essence of martyrdom on the physical battlefield.<sup>99</sup> But while martyrdom was the critical factor in both the tactical and strategic level of war, Islamic warfare implied more. Islamic warfare embodied the exuberant arrogance of the revolution wrapped in the supreme faith of Islam. Thus, only the masses of faithful, as manifestations of the national character, through individual self-sacrifice, tenacious will to overcome adversity and extraordinary commitment could attain a victory worthy enough to demonstrate the unique moral superiority<sup>100</sup> of Islam personified in the IRI. Prepared for a protracted and costly endeavor, Iran was “...not afraid of AWACs<sup>101</sup> and other weapons,”<sup>102</sup> as “only an ideologically motivated army like [Iran’s] ...are[sic] capable of mobilizing the people for a long war of attrition which we plan to wage until the Iraqi regime falls.”<sup>103</sup> But the religiously inspired attrition strategy harnessing the power of Islam still had to have the personnel *and material* – the means – to attain victory even with the hand of Mohammad. Upon the decision to invade in 1982, Iran had to import arms or develop their own military industrial-complex. Consequently, Iran needed effective diplomacy with other nations to successfully apply their specific and unique ways and means of warfare to achieve their wartime aims.

The decision to invade was made without any long-term view concerning the material requirements to export national power and attain strategic objectives. But this was not particularly surprising. The revolution and subsequent consolidation of the clerical regime brought to power men “whose outlook on international affairs was conditioned by their

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Americans, British and French can study at their staff colleges,” *New York Times*, 8 April 1982; quoted in Chubin and Trip, 43.

<sup>98</sup> Tehran: Home Service, 9 March 1982, in *FBIS*, VIII I-I, 10 March 1982; quoted in Chubin and Tripp, 40.

<sup>99</sup> Martyrdom is the physical act of dying for a cause; but without remembrance and the cultural industry that keeps the martyr alive after death it is nothing. Varzi, 56.

<sup>100</sup> Chubin and Tripp, 43.

<sup>101</sup> US AWACs deployed to Saudi Arabia early in the war to reduce Saudi anxiety. These craft along with other intelligence gathering systems became more significant when the US sided with the Iraqi and began sharing intelligence with Saddam.

<sup>102</sup> Chubin and Trip, 43.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

revolutionary experience,”<sup>104</sup> within a system of government “...unable to separate [its] domestic from foreign affairs.”<sup>105</sup> The ever-present factionalism also colored foreign policy with its brush.

Shaul Bakhash captured the conditions during this period by stating:

“Foreign policy was significantly influenced by domestic policies and rivalries, by the conflicting agendas of different government agencies or quasi-independent groups acting with only partial government sanction and by the propensity of the government itself to pursue several conflicting foreign –policy goals at the same time.”<sup>106</sup>

Consequently, the revolutionary foreign policy taken up by the regime in the midst of the decision to invade remained ideological in character, rigid and short-sighted in application and not specifically designed to facilitate victory, leading to international isolation and adversely affecting the prosecution of the war.

Relations with the superpowers in the period leading up to the counteroffensive clearly attest to the rigid application of revolutionary foreign policy working to the detriment of effective strategic power projection. Islamic Iran’s perception of its role in dealing with the superpowers was “to lead the oppressed masses in combat against these arrogant powers, to help them expose their impotence, and cut them down to size.”<sup>107</sup> With this ideological baseline, the unsanctioned seizure of the U.S. Embassy by student groups further heated the post-revolutionary environment between the nations. The U.S. authorized \$150 million<sup>108</sup> in spares and equipment as part of a negotiated settlement, but Iran did not pursue, despite the pressing need. To certain factions, resuming the arms flow from the U.S. would renew the conditions of dependency and enhance

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<sup>104</sup> Chubin and Tripp, 31.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>106</sup> Brown, ed., 252.

<sup>107</sup> Chubin and Tripp, 239.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 37. Dilip Hiro states that President Carter, “...promised that if the hostages were released the U.S. would airlift \$300-500 million worth of arms and spares that Iran had already paid for. But nothing came of this mainly because...Reagan’s campaign office secretly struck a deal with the emissaries of Iran...In return for the Iranian promise not to release the hostages before election day, the Republican candidates emissaries promised that ...Reagan would supply Iran with U.S. made weapons and spares.” After victory Reagan, “...lifted the sanctions against Iran.” With that said however, this researcher has not seen evidence of any arms shipped save those involved in the Irangate affair, addressed here in a subsequent section. Resolving this discrepancy requires further research and is beyond the scope of this effort.

“one of Washington’s instruments of hegemonic power.”<sup>109</sup> Internally, the refusal to attain desperately needed arms for the conventional army reflected the struggle between the President at the time, Bani Sadr, and the clerics. Bani Sadr, advocating that any agreement on the hostages should include those arms that had been paid for,<sup>110</sup> stated that the clerics, “simply made it impossible for our armed forces to perform their battle duties effectively and conclusively.”<sup>111</sup> The clerics distrusted Bani Sadr and his “obvious cultivation”<sup>112</sup> of the conventional army over the Pasharan. Evidenced by the slogan, “Revolution before Victory,” the clerics focused their concerns on the consolidation of power and Islamic revolutionary ideology. Relations with the Soviets also reflected the primacy of revolutionary principles over military realities.

Viewing the I-IW through a cold war lens, the USSR offered to sell weapons to Iran immediately after hostilities broke out to offset potential U.S. military action to free the hostages and increase their anti-imperialist credibility with the new regime.<sup>113</sup> Based on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and a rigid application of the “neither East, nor West” revolutionary ideology, Iran rebuffed the offer. However, demonstrating the lengths the Soviets would go, they still authorized Syria and Libya to provide arms to Iran.<sup>114</sup> Soviet willingness to become a primary arms supplier at the expense of Iraq in the early stages of the war, while Iran clung to the trappings of revolutionary ideology, illustrated the regime’s lack of vision and relative priority of the war. In 1982, flush with victory in expelling the Iraqis from their territory and exuding revolutionary hubris, Iran placed ideology ahead of war interests by ignoring the Soviet threat to resume arms shipments to Iraq if Iran pursued a counteroffensive. “By the end of the year, Soviet-built missiles were falling on Dizful and other Iranian border cities.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Bani Sadr, *LeMonde*, 18 November 1979; quoted in Chubin and Tripp, 37.

<sup>110</sup> Chubin and Tripp, 37.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>113</sup> Hiro, 73.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>115</sup> Gary Sick, “Iran’s Quest for Superpower Status,” 709.

Further disregarding strategic war aims as a priority, Iran became “decidedly more assertive”<sup>116</sup> in spreading its Islamic crusade throughout the region beginning in 1982 and continued with varying degrees of intensity throughout the war. Using the Haj as an opportunity to stage anti-Israeli and anti-American demonstrations, Iran disrupted the pilgrimages and give the harsh Saudi security response, further exacerbated poor relations with that country. Relations with other Gulf countries proved much the same as threatening the amir of Bahrain with a Shia uprising<sup>117</sup> and bombing foreign and Arab offices and personnel in Kuwait<sup>118</sup> aptly demonstrated. More pronounced and successful, Iran’s efforts to promote the Islamic revolutionary agenda in Lebanon proved nuanced and effective.<sup>119</sup> However, regardless of their effectiveness, Iranian efforts in Lebanon plainly demonstrated a lack of dedicated focus on the I-IW as a diplomatic necessity. Associated with the 1982 decision, the impact of these regional forays to export the revolution and the self-inflicted wounds concerning windows of opportunity to procure clearly needed arms and spares had severe repercussions on Iran’s ability to project power in the ensuing years.

While the internal dynamics of the regime in 1982 – consolidation of clerical power, factionalism, inculcating the masses with the righteous fury of Islam and Islamic revolutionary zeal – facilitated the decision to invade, these same conditions possessed second and third order effects that the IRI did not anticipate. Diplomatically, the result of rigid application of Islamic revolutionary ideology led to extreme international isolation and notions of Islamic self-sufficiency based on an economy almost solely dependent on oil to generate revenue and devoid

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<sup>116</sup> Efraim Karsh, ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications, The War and the Spread of Islamic Fundamentalism*, by Robin Wright, 112.

<sup>117</sup> Brown, ed., 249.

<sup>118</sup> Efraim Karsh, ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications, The War and the Spread of Islamic Fundamentalism*, by Robin Wright, 112.

<sup>119</sup> A number of variables fell into place for the Iranians in Lebanon. Historical, cultural and familial Shia ties, weak central government, common enemy, disenfranchised Shia population, humanitarian aide, effective geopolitical relations with Syria, et al contributed to the rise of Hezbollah and Iranian influence in Lebanon. Unfortunately, Iranian strategic power projection in Lebanon is beyond the scope of this thesis and thus is a topic for further research.

of a significant industrial base. The reliance on Islam as a tool of national power, creating a cult of martyrs placed an intense strain on the *mosta'zafin*, the regimes most loyal and significant power base. Factionalism generated the split of the ground forces, taking the primary control of operations away from the professionals and denying them the tools required for success. The split promoted the ideologically pure Pasdaran, consequently resulting in years of ineffective offensives and untold casualties.

In addition to these unanticipated events and conditions, the regime at the time of the decision could not effectively conceptualize and execute the ways and means necessary to attain strategic objectives in a conventional war. The IRI neither articulated the ways to achieve victory through a series of campaigns, nor provided the valid material support required. These unforeseen circumstances and inability to conceptualize suitable ways and means to achieve victory forced Iran to take and accept ad hoc steps and conditions forming the causal linkage that spiraled Iran into defeat and illustrated its failure to project power effectively in a conventional war.

## **The Arms-for-Hostages Affair**

The arms-for-hostages affair<sup>120</sup> between Iran and the U.S. highlighted a step in the downward spiral towards defeat, Iran's international isolation, and the effort to shift to a more pragmatic worldview. From 1982 to 1984, Iran conducted seven major offensives, failing to achieve any significant results.<sup>121</sup> Iraq had withdrawn from almost all Iranian territory, consolidated defensive positions supported with combined arms, and fought well defending their borders. With the primacy of the Pasdaran, the IRI emphasized infantry centric, "poorly planned and improvised human wave attacks."<sup>122</sup> The predominance of the Pasdaran and emphasis on personnel over material transformed the ground forces into an almost complete infantry force,

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<sup>120</sup> Also called Irangate and the Iran-Contra Affair.

<sup>121</sup> Hiro, 289-290.



precluding the opportunity for a major breakthrough.<sup>123</sup> After the frontal assault phase of the war (1982-1984)<sup>124</sup> and its associated high casualties and loss of equipment, the professional military appealed to the clerics to adjust the “conduct of the war in the direction of greater realism.”<sup>125</sup> The next phase, defensive jihad, denoting the influence of the professional army, illustrated the lack of spares and equipment and the need to preserve combat power. With a stalemate on the ground based on Iran’s ineffective offensives, Iraq turned to attacking strategic economic targets<sup>126</sup> and population centers.<sup>127</sup> “By early 1984...it had become increasingly clear...to the leadership in Tehran that a military victory would prove illusive without access to weapon systems to offset those available to Iraq.”<sup>128</sup> Only the superpowers possessed those systems.

Wounded by the application of her own Islamic revolutionary rhetoric on the world stage, Iran was internationally isolated. As noted above, the IRI had lost the chance to secure arms from the Soviets and was angered over their occupation of Afghanistan. The U.S., still seething from the hostage crisis, hardened their position towards Iran, initiating “Operation STAUNCH, a voluntary worldwide arms embargo”<sup>129</sup> in 1983. Going further, the U.S. formally declared Iran a sponsor of international terrorism in January 1984. Denied the major sellers and feeling the impact of Operation STAUNCH take effect,<sup>130</sup> Iran was forced to procure a wide variety of arms

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<sup>122</sup> Chubin and Tripp, 43.

<sup>123</sup> Karsh, *Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988*, 47.

<sup>124</sup> Chubin and Tripp state that the war went through the following phases: “heroic improvised defense (1980-1981) to frontal assaults (1982-1984) to limited mobile attacks and defensive jihad (1985), to return to the grand final offensive (1986-1987), and now to the more limited attacks of ‘repeated blows’...” This description is post facto. I have not seen any documentation that the Iranians had put together any cohesive campaign to achieve their aims. Rather, their efforts were ad hoc, shifting to different phases only when the previous was found or made untenable.

<sup>125</sup> Chubin and Tripp, 47

<sup>126</sup> The ‘Tanker War’ attacking oil tanker in the Gulf and other oil infrastructure targets.

<sup>127</sup> ‘War of the Cities.’ War of the Cities had a number of iterations throughout the war.

<sup>128</sup> Chubin and Trip, 223.

<sup>129</sup> Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History* (NY: The New Press, 1993), 213.

<sup>130</sup> Chubin and Tripp, 223.

at high cost from a plethora of countries,<sup>131</sup> making sustainment of the force that much more difficult. Capturing the regime's solitude, Khomeini remarked in August 1983, "We have no more friends than can be counted on the fingers of one hand."<sup>132</sup> This geopolitical isolation and high cost of arms also affected the economy.

Iraq's strategic targeting of oil infrastructure and the instigation of the 'tanker war' combined with Iran's isolation, revolutionary ideology stressing economic independence and austerity, and vehement opposition to foreign investment and borrowing,<sup>133</sup> intensified Iran's economic vulnerability. Making huge efforts after the revolution to reduce debt and increase oil production, Iran's oil revenues reached their highpoint in 1983, but dropped one third in 1984-85, and reached its nadir in 1986.<sup>134</sup> Economic woes, diplomatic isolation, poor performance at the front and "widespread war-weariness and a decline in morale"<sup>135</sup> at home compelled Iran to accept a more pragmatic position and approach, risking its Islamic credibility. This dilemma was aptly characterized by the arms-for-hostages affair.

The events and context of Irangate represented the virtual antithesis of revolutionary ideology, a fundamental shift in policy, and internal factionalism. The resultant effects proved extremely detrimental to Iranian power projection over the course of the war. The first crack in Iran's ideological rigidity came when Khomeini summoned his diplomats from abroad in October 1984 and directed them to take a new approach:

We should act as it was done in early Islam when the Prophet...sent ambassadors to all parts of the world to establish proper relations. We cannot sit idly by saying we have nothing to do with governments. This is contrary to intellect and religious law. We should have relations with all governments with the exception

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<sup>131</sup> Karsh, *Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988*, 44-45. Those countries included Libya, Syria, North Korea, Britain, China, Taiwan, Argentina, South Africa, Pakistan, Switzerland, Israel, et al.

<sup>132</sup> Hiro, 154.

<sup>133</sup> Brown, ed., 257.

<sup>134</sup> Karsh, *Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988*, 74. \$19 billion in 1983; \$12-13 billion in 1984-85; and \$6.6 billion in 1986.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 73.

of a few with which we have no relations at present... We will not establish relations with American unless America behaves properly.<sup>136</sup>

This dramatic change of course, as result of the realities described above, set the environment for Irangate. Khomeini's decree referencing the prophet, and the degree of his involvement, designed to placate the most vehement factions in government, implied that he had been influenced by Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani, the astute speaker of Parliament (Majles) and one of the few visionary realists in government, possessed significant influence. Prior to the announcement,<sup>137</sup> "certain Iranians"<sup>138</sup> had secretly approached Israel, as an interlocutor, and mentioned the potential for "an exchange of U.S.-made weapons for the release of American hostages in Lebanon."<sup>139</sup> Over the next two years, Iran used its influence over Hezbollah and other Shia groups in Lebanon to broker deals releasing hostages, in return for intelligence briefings on Iraq and the USSR, and the delivery 1500 TOW anti-tank missiles and spares for its HAWK anti-aircraft systems.<sup>140</sup> Successfully reestablishing the arms supply relationship provided Iran with a huge boost in confidence. However, it was misplaced.

The dealings with the U.S. brought short-term gains at the expense of long-term war goals and aggravated existing factional tensions. Khomeini rationalized away Iranian actions that were in fact diametrically opposed to revolutionary ideology. Supposing that American had been 'behaving properly,' Khomeini authorized policies and actions favorable to the U.S. and Israel,<sup>141</sup> formerly the two greatest enemies of the state. Later stating that those hostile to Iran:

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<sup>136</sup> *FBIS: South Asia*, 30 October, 1984; quoted in Sick, *Iran's Quest for Superpower Status*, 701.

<sup>137</sup> July 1984.

<sup>138</sup> Most certainly aligned with Rafsanjani given his involvement in other aspects of the affair.

<sup>139</sup> Kronbluh and Byrne, 214.

<sup>140</sup> Gary Sick, "Trial By Error: Reflections on the Iran-Iraq War," *Middle East Journal*, 43, 3 (Spring 89), 238.

<sup>141</sup> N.R. Keddie and M.J. Gasiorowski, eds., *Neither East, Nor West: Iran the Soviet Union and the United States, The US Overture to Iran 1985-1986: An Analysis*, by James A. Bill (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1990), 168-174.

...have apparently come back today and presented themselves meekly and humbly at the door of the nation wishing to establish relations...Right now, all the big countries are competing to establish relations with Iran.<sup>142</sup>

While this statement was made just after the scandal broke, it captured the essence of the national arrogance that grew in the middle of the arms deal. This optimism created an environment favorable for the shift of the war strategy from defensive jihad to one of final victory<sup>143</sup> and shaped the perception in the regime that the reestablishment of relations with the U.S. was a remarkable vindication of their hard-line policy.<sup>144</sup> But the fact that Iran conducted these negotiations secretly denoted Khomeini's anxiety over the war situation and the internal factions within the government.

The Irangate transactions could not be conducted overtly given the influence of multiple centers of power and factionalism within the government. Continuously balancing factions for regime preservation, Khomeini understood the competing interests of the pressing requirements for war and the necessity of Islamic revolutionary legitimacy. Both were required; thus the authorization for Rafsanjani's faction to pursue the deal covertly. The covert actions, their discovery, and subsequent release to the press were the result of internal political divisions and quasi-sanctioned power bases taking action and making decisions in the name of the regime and their perceptions of its best interests.<sup>145</sup> The actual results of the affair for Iran were not nearly as favorable as Khomeini's rhetoric would make it seem.

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<sup>142</sup> Khomeini, *FBIS:South Asia*, 20 November 1986; quoted in Sick, *Iran's Quest for Superpower Status*, 703.

<sup>143</sup> Chronologically from Chubin and Tripp, the shift from defensive jihad to final victory occurred at the end of 1985. The contention here is that the arms deals, after 18 months of negotiations and delivers, provided the confidence and helped set the conditions to allow this shift. Other factors such as the drop in oil prices and growing war-weariness also increased the pursuit of a decisive victory.

<sup>144</sup> Sick, *Iran's Quest for Superpower Status*, 703.

<sup>145</sup> Exactly how Irangate became uncovered and released to the press remains uncertain. However most research points to elements of the IRGC learning of the U.S. delegations' trip to Tehran in May 1986. When Hashemi, a hardliner with political connections got arrested in Iran, the IRGC passed information about the American visit to Hashemi's associates in Lebanon where it was leaked to a local newspaper.

While the regime perceived, and perhaps had achieved some short-term gains manifest in the Fao offensive by virtue of Irangate, they had in fact taken one more step towards defeat.

From an American perspective,

The Iran initiative succeeded only in replacing three American hostages with another three, arming Iran with 2004 TOWs and more than 200 vital spare parts for HAWK missile batteries,...undermining U.S. credibility in the eyes of the world, damaging relations between the Executive and the Congress and engulfing the President in one of the greatest credibility crises of any Administration in U.S. history<sup>146</sup>

The fallout led to the U.S. toughening its position towards Iran, compelling a greater slant in the direction of Iraq. “When the key actors were forced to testify publicly, they blamed neither themselves,...the president, nor even the Israelis. Instead, they all bitterly blamed the Iranians. The president...led the chorus of accusations.”<sup>147</sup> The Executive and Congress could not politically afford any type of rapprochement with the regime. Congress became more active in passing anti-Iranian legislation<sup>148</sup> at home and encouraging adherence to Operation STAUNCH abroad. Thus when the tanker war grew in intensity,<sup>149</sup> the U.S. began to escort Kuwaiti tankers, leading to direct military involvement in the war against Iran.

The Iranians proclaimed the “Irangate affair as ‘an issue greater than all our [previous] victories.’”<sup>150</sup> But based on conditions in the sixth year of war<sup>151</sup> and particularly public awareness that the regime had dealt diplomatically with two of its mortal enemies, Khomeini’s words ring hollow. Designed to placate factions in his own government who perceived “any

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<sup>146</sup> US Congress, House of Representatives and Senate Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigation of the Iran-Contra Affair*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1987), 280; quoted in Keddie and Gasiorowski, eds., 166.

<sup>147</sup> Bill, 177.

<sup>148</sup> Hiro, 294.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 295. In 1986, Iraq struck twice as many tankers as in 1985, 61 and Iran hit three times as many, 41.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>151</sup> 1986 was characterized by fuel and power shortages in Tehran, increasingly effective strikes on oil infrastructure, reduced oil revenues, and growing war-weariness based on failure to achieve victory on the ground.

dealings with the ‘Great Satan’ as treasonous,”<sup>152</sup> Khomeini was again attempting to play the role of mediator between the factions to avoid disrupting the regime while also putting a positive spin on the event for public consumption both at home and abroad. Rafsanjani captured the extreme state of factionalism existing in the regime at the time, stating,

There are at present two relatively powerful factions in our country with differences of view on how the country should be run and on the role of the government and that of the private sector in affairs. These two tendencies also exist in the Majlis, in the government, within the clergy, within the universities and across the society as a whole.<sup>153</sup>

The factionalism endemic to the regime significantly contributed to the desperate need for arms by bifurcating the ground forces and allowing the Pasdaran to control operations from 1982-1984. That same factionalism sabotaged an arrangement that was clearly working in Iran’s favor and created confidence in the potential for a decisive victory. But Iran was in fact overconfident, and the regime had taken one more step toward defeat.

## **The Fao Offensive**

The Fao offensive was chronologically and contextually linked to Irangate. Coming approximately 18 months after the initiation of contact, the offensive was both the physical manifestation of the confidence generated by the deal and a contributor to the growing sense of optimism over the war and the status of the regime. As Khomeini stated, “There was a time when the situation was chaotic and everything was in ruins, but – thank God – everything is now proper and right...Domestic and international affairs are put right.”<sup>154</sup> At the time of the offensive, the IRI believed, by virtue of its rhetoric, that they had found the material means to attain victory. However, the regime was still looking for the elusive methods to achieve their aims. The highpoint of Iranian military achievement, gaining the only significant strategic foothold in the oil

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<sup>152</sup> Sick, *Iran’s Quest for Superpower Status*, 704.

<sup>153</sup> *FBIS: South Asia*, June 11 1986; quoted in Sick, *Iran’s Quest for Superpower Status*, 704.

<sup>154</sup> *FBIS: South Asia*, June 9, 1986, I-2; quoted in Sick, “Trial By Error, Reflections on the Iran-Iraq War,” *Middle East Journal*, 43, 2 (Spring 1989), 238.

rich region of southern Iraq, the Fao offensive demonstrated the advantages of coordinated Islamic warfare in strategic power projection. But Fao was also Iran's culmination. While a significant Iranian victory, the results of the offensive illustrated the intense tension borne of factionalism between the Pasdaran and the regular army, created significant regional and international anxiety, and reinvigorated the quest for a grand decisive victory. While counter-intuitive, the victory actually contributed to defeat.

The objectives of the offensive<sup>155</sup> were to cut off Iraq from access to the Gulf and eventually seize Basra. Compared with other offensives, it was brilliantly planned and effectively executed. Thoroughly rehearsed, the operation combined the planning and operational control of the professional army with the characteristic zeal of the Pasdaran. Launching a supporting attack towards Basra to fix Iraqi attention and forces, Iran conducted a two pronged amphibious attack across the Shatt al-Arab. Assaulting in a driving rainstorm with a preponderance of Pasdaran light infantry over close terrain, the Iranians achieved tactical surprise and held their ground despite vicious counter attacks. Unfortunately, given the paucity of armor and poor logistical sustainment capabilities, the IRI could not exploit the breakthrough. Nevertheless, the operation provided a considerable psychological boost for the IRI who used the success for maximum propaganda and morale-building effect.<sup>156</sup> The results of the most significant power projection effort in the war were not as beneficial as it might seem

Just beneath the surface of the effective coordination seen in the offensive was the deep seated animosity between the Pasdaran and professional army generated from the lack of centralized command and control. A few months after the offensive, the literal and physical manifestation of factionalism merged when the commander of the ground forces and the

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<sup>155</sup> The objectives have been assumed on the researcher's part as no evidence has been found as the Iranian's exact intent. Conclusion is based on the strategic significance of the ground, the attempt to seize Umm Qasr, denying Iraq access to the Gulf and previous efforts to take Basra, the major southern city in Iraq.

<sup>156</sup> Karsh, *Iran-Iraq War: 1980-1988*, 48.

commander of the Pasdaran engaged in fisticuffs over policy. Khomeini had to intercede stating, “We must understand that if there were to be any disputes among you...not only are we doomed here and now, but we are guilty before God.”<sup>157</sup> The ground force commander was relieved shortly thereafter, passing the Pasdaran the reins of control once again. Clearly they were ‘doomed’ as Iran “did not conduct a single successful military operation of any significance from that [time] until the end of the war.”<sup>158</sup> That Khomeini would sack a commander that had given him his only major victory projecting power beyond the border and potentially the only man able to win the war, clearly indicted the overwhelming importance of Islamic ideology over military-strategic reality.

On the geopolitical level, Iranian success at Fao “sent shock waves all over the Gulf and Arab world,”<sup>159</sup> and beyond. Even though the Iranian Prime Minister Khamenei had stated, “We do not want to export armed revolution to any country,”<sup>160</sup> during the ‘open window’ period, Gulf states feared the specter of an Iranian victory would fan the flames of Islamic revolution and destabilize the region. Robin West argued that Iran’s previous efforts to export revolution in the region with associated extreme rhetoric and violence had backfired at this juncture, compelling nations to align with Iraq based on perceived threats to their national security rather than any particular affinity.<sup>161</sup> The superpowers were also concerned with regional stability and the flow of oil. Thus, the success at Fao and the potential for an Iranian victory combined with previous attempts to export the Islamic revolution pushed countries into Saddam’s camp. The Soviets and Americans even found common ground, developing a dialog that included regional conflicts.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> *FBIS: South Asia*, July 21 1986; quoted in Sick, *Iran’s Quest for Superpower Status*, 706.

<sup>158</sup> Sick, *Trail by Error*, 239.

<sup>159</sup> Efraim Karsh, *Adelphi Papers – 220, The Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis* (Dorchester, UK: The Dorset Press, 1987), 32.

<sup>160</sup> *FBIS: South Asia*, October 30 1984; quoted in Sick, *Iran’s Quest for Superpower Status*, 701.

<sup>161</sup> Efraim Karsh, ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications, The War and the Spread of Islamic Fundamentalism*, by Robin Wright, 114.

<sup>162</sup> Karsh, ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications, A Military-Strategic Overview*, by Chaim Herzog, (NY: St. Martains Press, 1989), 265.



On the national level in Iran, the Fao breakthrough provided evidence that the stalemate could be broken. Based on the victory, the regime changed its strategy to one of Final Grand Victory. The economy also drove the requirement to seek a rapid, decisive victory as the Iraqi attacks and the drop in the price of oil put a major strain on the populace. The shift in strategy induced the regime “to broaden the mobilization base and transform the war into a ‘real people’s war.’”<sup>163</sup> “By the early summer [1986] emphasis had shifted to full mobilization of ‘all the forces and resources of the country for the war’”<sup>164</sup> after Khomeini had given “one of his strongest call for all able bodied men and continuation of the war.”<sup>165</sup>

The ‘Year of Victory’ (1986) wasn’t; nor was 1987, nor 1988. Over time Khomeini realized that the regime was on the brink of collapse evidenced by a shift of the war strategy from final offensive to “repeated blows,” dissolving the ruling Islamic Republic Party, and eventually appointing Rafsanjani as acting commander-in-chief. The shift in methods denoted the inability to continue to man and equip large scale offensives that had no appreciable positive effects on the Iraqis. The regime had become very sensitive to the incessant burden placed on the mosta’zafin to sustain the war. Khomeini’s nullification of the Islamic Republican Party and appointment of Rafsanjani as commander-in-chief indicated that he had undoubtedly aligned himself with one faction over another, and these actions denoted just how serious the situation had become. With Iran engaging the U.S. in multiple violent naval confrontations, suffering from increasingly deep and effective air strikes on oil targets and breaking in the face of much improved Iraqi offensive ground capabilities, Iran was at the end of its rope militarily. Thus when the U.S. Navy negligently shot down a passenger airplane, Iran took the opportunity to resolve the I-IW diplomatically and accepted the UN ceasefire resolution. In the approximate two and one half

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<sup>163</sup> Chubin and Tripp, 76. The Pasdaran Comander suggested that in mid-1986, that Iran had still only used 2 per cent of its popular and 12 percent of its economic forces in the war: “The war should be completely transformed into a people’s war...emphasizing that Iran’s [soldiers] did not need advanced aircraft and bombs to achieve victory...” Tehran Home Service, 31 May 1986 in *BBC/SWB/ME*, 3 June 1986 (A/Z); quoted in Chubin and Tripp, 41.

years from the victory at Fao, Iran had lost the war and with Saddam still in power, failed to achieve its wartime objective. Borne of the 1982 decision to invade, and made possible in part from the Irangate affair, the results of the offensive – regional anxiety and geopolitical alignment with Iraq, a reinvigorated quest for decisive victory and an exacerbation of the factional split within Iran – led to their defeat.

From the analysis of the decision to invade, the arms-for-hostages deal and the Fao offensive, it is clear that Iran neither developed the ways, nor the means to achieve their strategic ends. Internal political factionalism adversely affected both the methods and resources applied to the war. Rigid adherence to Islamic revolutionary ideology in geopolitics created conditions of diplomatic isolation making it impossible to gain a major, consistent arms supplier and compelled other nations to align with Iraq. The power of Islam both hindered and enhanced Iran's war effort. In the end however, faith by itself could not overcome the capabilities of their rival.

While the war has been characterized as “a costly exercise in futility,”<sup>166</sup> for the Iranians it obviously was not. The war allowed for the consolidation of clerical power and validated their form of governance. From a strategic power projection perspective, the I-IW provided many insights towards understanding Iran's rational context for employment of element of national power beyond its borders.

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<sup>164</sup> Karsh, *Iran-Iraq War: 1980-1988*, 74.

<sup>165</sup> Hiro, 170.

<sup>166</sup> Karsh, *Iran-Iraq War: 1980-1988*, 74.

## Conclusions

If each nation is unique, then the wars they wage are unique, as war reflects the societies that wage them. The unique aspects of Iranian strategic power projection, products of their history, culture, society, religion, et al, are complex, diverse and overlapping. The preceding narrative was designed to provide the foundational understanding of some of these characteristics of Iranian strategic power projection and analyze how they were manifest in the I-IW. The result of the examination provides a number of key insights from the war which in turn allow a more reasoned understanding of Iran's employment of its national power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

If the so-called 'imposed war' could be referred to as the 'self-imposed war,' then similarly, Iran was self-defeated. In eight years of fighting, Iran suffered approximately 900 thousand casualties, sustained significant infrastructure damage to its economic lifeline – oil, and became an international pariah, and yet did not completely mobilize the nation until the last two years of the war. Given the rhetoric emanating from the regime, this fact seems glaringly odd *prima facie*. However, when considering Iran's most important strategic objective, existence of the Islamic regime, the late full mobilization becomes easier to understand. Other significant insights involve the power of Islam, geopolitics and military capabilities, all colored by the ever-present factionalism rife within the IRI.

The 1982 Iranian decision to invade Iraq was not primarily based on winning a war and compelling Iraq to its will. The decision was made to maintain the regime and the momentum of the revolution. The war was a tool for the clerics to focus the nation, continue the consolidation of power and ensure the regime's survival, while allowing it to support revolutionary strategic objectives. Rather than permitting the military professionals to conduct and potentially win, the regime opted to put the Pasdaran in control until it desperately needed a victory. Once achieved, the control was passed back to the Pasdaran. However, had the army, the instrument of

oppression and manifestation of dependency during the shah's reign, been given the opportunity to win, then the legitimacy of the revolution would have been severely questioned. The late full mobilization also emphasizes the primacy of the revolutionary government over military victory, for in the early years the regime was busy institutionalizing their power and not overly concerned with the course of the war. Full mobilization occurred only after a decisive victory seemed possible, war-weariness set in and the price of oil bottomed out, forcing the regime to seek a decision to end the war. Not until the burdens placed on society and the nation put the government in jeopardy did Khomeini make significant changes in the way the war was managed and executed, primarily by making Rafsanjani the commander-in-chief. While the decision came too late to avoid defeat, it did save the regime. While a divine Islamic cause, Khomeini still opted for ceasefire and compromise rather than potentially letting the regime crumble.

The power of militant Islam was plainly evident in every internal and external facet of the war. Islam was the purpose, method, resource and endstate. As the primary element of national power the IRI chose to employ in the war, all others assumed a secondary role. This was a critical mistake. The elements of government must work in consonance to effectively project power. By failing to gain a consistent single source supplier, develop the economy or organize the military forces appropriately, Iran could neither equip nor sustain the force; thus failing to attain the means to facilitate victory. The mobilized masses of the oppressed with passionate Islamic faith, employing methods of war that became synonymous with martyrdom cannot maximize their capabilities without artillery rounds, tanks, bombs and spares. Blood and faith were used to great effect as tools of strategic power projection, but they can't compete with combined arms, current methods and requisite resources. Effective diplomacy, whether revolutionary or pragmatic, must support, not hinder the national sacrifice on the front.

Self-imposed international isolation, generated from unbending adherence to revolutionary ideology, threatening words and deeds to regional neighbors and failing to possess geopolitical vision and timing, created conditions that adversely affected strategic power

projection and precluded victory. Inflexible observance of ideology can evince perceptions of national tenacity and perseverance both internally and externally. However, in moving from threats and insults to overt and covert military action and terror, the IRI inflamed regional animosities, produced fear and anxiety and alienated countries in the region and potential international partners. While Khomeini did show some flexibility in international affairs moving towards a pragmatic program, he was always late, changing out of desperation rather than vision. Khomeini's patronage and support of Rafsanjani during the latter half of the war proved insightful, but too late to have a significant impact on the outcome. At the height of its international isolation and weakness in 1988, Rafsanjani captured the essence of Iran's actions and position, "We have created enemies for ourselves [in the international community]...We have not spent enough time seeing they become friends."<sup>167</sup> Effective geopolitical decisions were critical in developing the economy and fueling the war machine, but Khomeini's lack of vision and timing are understandable given the amount of effort required to balance the internal factions and maintain the regime.

Competing factions with multiple sources of power within the government were a product of the clerical regime, adversely influenced all aspects of strategic power projection and prevented unity of command with the military. The velayat-e faqih, dividing power between the clerics and the people,<sup>168</sup> the differing doctrinal views on the nature of an Islamic Republic and the lack of authoritative guidance on how the government should function created the unique factionalism in the IRI. The competing centers of power can make governmental action seem psychotic as witnessed by the Irangate affair. The seeming unity, provided by the shared Shia Islamic faith, shields the complex, bifurcated machinery of state and makes external predictions problematic. Forcing Khomeini into a delicate balancing act, the internal splits negatively

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<sup>167</sup> Interview on July 2, *FBIS-NES*, July 6 1988, p. 60; quoted in Sick, *Trial by Error*, 242.

<sup>168</sup> The clerics received considerably more.

affected the unity critical to waging the I-IW. This split was physically and literally manifest in the ground forces.

To be militarily successful in a large scale conventional conflict, the forces must be organized for success. Thus, the Iranian failure to export power and compel its rival to its will was hardly surprising. Lack of unity of command and the animosities and obstacles it engendered arguably doomed Iran upon the 1982 counteroffensive. That Iran would continue for six more years operating under those conditions for the majority of that time and employing methods reminiscent of World War I, seem unfathomable to the West. However, credit must be given to Iran for using the tools at their disposal to its greatest effect and possessing an extremely high tolerance for national pain. But as noted above, the war aims were only of secondary importance to the strengthening and existence of the regime. Some have stated that few valid lessons have been derived from the I-IW worthy of study. From a purely military perspective, time spent reviewing lessons gained from World War I and the innovations that ensued would indeed be more useful. However, for the military thinker, reflecting on the rationality and dynamics of the elements that constitute the Iranian power projection system, the study may prove significant and beneficial.

## **Dynamics and Rational Context**

The dynamics and rational context of Iranian strategic power projection will closely adhere to the four broad based strategic objectives presented previously and conform to its own particular set of rules forged in large part during the I-IW. Demonstrated by the amount of effort and sacrifice expended during the I-IW to institutionalize the regime, the clerics will ensure the nation will bear any burden, suffer any pain or endure any hardship to maintain their system of government. In the past decade, many researchers have argued that the coming of Khatami's presidency would usher in political reform. As an example, Mehdi Moslem stated in 2002 that "the 1997 presidential election should be an alarm for all factions that society will no longer

accept oppressive measures.”<sup>169</sup> His prediction was decidedly short lived given current conditions. The society will accept those conditions that the government provides. Luckily for the Iranian people, the clerical regime does have a certain faith-based sense of social responsibility. Of course, as long as the individual does not belong to an opposition group or violate the mandates of Islamic values. From the constitution, the clerics possess all the hard power of the regime to both export influence abroad and control the population at home. The president controls the budget and can act as a mouthpiece of the regime, but must influence rather than direct. Thus, while their regime is a republic giving voice to the population, the clerics own the real centers of power in government. Additionally, the concept of reform must be applied in an Iranian context. Reform does not mean changing the system of government. It can imply a softening of positions diplomatically or provide more social freedom to the populace, but the clerics will not authorize any factional candidate on the ballot that advocates changing vilayat-e faqih. That will only occur with a violent change of power. Additionally, the idea that external actors can or should provide resources to opposition groups advocating a change of governance is not a judicious expenditure. The Islamic revolution, produced from internal sources and institutionalized in the forge of the I-IW, will crumble or implode from within, before it succumbs to external pressure. The IRI will exist at least as long as the Soviet regime did, if not longer.

The IRI has become much more astute in managing that external pressure along its borders and exporting conventional military power. Iran has refrained from employing conventional military power though it has had many opportunities. Civil war in Tajikistan, tensions with the Taliban and the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq provided ample fodder for the militant Islamic flame. Given Iran’s performance in the I-IW, it becomes clear why Iran has not embarked on conventional wars to export its power and influence. With ground forces

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<sup>169</sup> Moslem, 272.

split and professional army marginalized, employing Iranian concepts of 'Islamic warfare' with requisite human wave attacks seem counter productive unless the existence of the regime is at stake. Instead of conventional force with the prospect of dubious results, the regime relies on their trusted Pasdaran to spread their influence and power to coerce, cajole and compel.

Operating, it seems, under a broad umbrella of ideology, the Pasdaran, working to their strengths, can employ small cells using unconventional or asymmetric means to train, mentor, equip and resource other Moslem forces. Over time, Iran can use its influence on these groups to conduct overt acts of terror, political violence or conventional warfare against rival states, and still retain plausible deniability. As evident in Iraq, Iran can provide an enduring presence of small ideologically sound elements operating under loose, decentralized control to organize, indoctrinate, train, fund and equip militant Islamic groups to physically and spiritually champion Iranian interests rather than resort to a conventional capability. The critical feature that allows them to project strategic power in this manner are the common interests and connections of Islam.

As Islam forms the basis and substance of the regime, the export of Islamic power and the perception of Iran's Islamic legitimacy remain the most critical elements in the IRI's strategic power projection equation. The projection of Islamic power takes many forms. From providing humanitarian aide, building religious schools, advocating Islamic social values to taking hostages and ramming a vehicle filled with explosives into a crowd of civilians, Iran continues to use all physical, intellectual, financial and spiritual means to continue its struggle against the oppressors. However, the hand of Iranian Islamic power is no longer fisted, surrounded by armor and wielded with reckless abandon as it was in the I-IW. The hand is open and giving or closed and ready to strike given the situation. Iran's wielding of this power has become much more patient and thoughtful as well. This approach is plainly seen in Iran's war against Israel. Providing a stage to demonstrate its Islamic legitimacy and spread the revolution, Iran's support for Hezbollah and Hamas services Iranian interests both internally and internationally. Close study of these cases



can provide clear blueprints for the design of Iranian power projection in Iraq and elsewhere in the future.

The design of Iranian diplomacy will stay fixed on economic development and regional hegemony. As seen in the war, Iran is economically vulnerable. With a moderated perspective, but retaining the residual distrust of the West, Iran will continue to grow and attempt to diversify its economy. However, oil revenue will remain its primary economic engine, and single source economies accept high risks. As the regime only agreed to a ceasefire when their political base was perceived to be ready to collapse from economic and human suffering, economic leverage through embargoes and sanctions could be very effective in influencing the regime. That Iran's moderate, amenable approach within OPEC mitigated risk both during and after the war attests to Iran's understanding of its potentially precarious position.

In dealing with other nations Iran will continue to fluctuate between a Western understanding of pragmatic to completely unpredictable. The Islamic regime can and will function similar to the Westphalian concept of the nation-state when it fits its needs. However, religion will always trump the Western concept of reason as seen in Iran's absolute refusal to compromise in the war. Thus, their actions may seem wildly unpredictable to Western observers. Militant Islamic rhetoric will continue to emanate from the regime as witnessed in the current President's multiple vitriolic diatribes against the U.S. and Israel. The real questions for the student of Iranian power projection are why and for what audience do the Iranians take such actions. Is the statement or event a meaningful representation of the clerical regimes beliefs and intent or was it conducted to support internal political factions. A recent event provides many such questions.

The taking of 15 British hostages highlights a number of points made regarding current and future Iranian strategic power projection and begs numerous questions for the student. In the Spring of 2007, 15 British sailors and marines were seized by elements of the Pasdaran in international waters, held for a few weeks, squeezed for propaganda value and released. The

event demonstrated the primacy of the Pasdaran in power projection, reinforced Iranian Islamic credibility in the Muslim world, illustrated the pursuit of regional hegemony by flexing military muscle and highlighted the unpredictability and factionalism within the regime. But questions abound concerning the event. Who ordered the action? Given the lack of transparency, the observer could answer anyone from an enthusiastic local commander operating under broad guidance, to the head of the clerical government or any level in between. Was the event influenced by factional politics with one group believing that the action could offset the efforts of another? The answers are illusive, but based on current trends in strategic power projection, it was probably either a local commander taking the initiative, or an act to facilitate factional politics. Directly seizing the hostages violates the Iranian trend of plausible deniability, and unlike the U.S. hostage crisis, there was no internal benefit for the regime to hold the British personnel; thus their quick release. To offer more than conjecture here would require extensive study. The purpose was to review the event as a minor image in the collage that is Iranian power projection and attempt to provide a bit of understanding. For as Robert McFarland found out in May 1986, one does not want to show up to a potential gunfight bearing presents and a cake. When dealing with Iran, the unlearned and unaware approach is fraught with danger.

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